March 9, 1982

Dear Sarah,

A fine family drama full of grotesque and pitiful details took place among the Byrons, and I have been waiting to describe it to you while further tiny details have revealed themselves - as the Byrons relate events in their characteristic mixture of tacit silences, laconic facts, and sudden flashes of surprising outspokeness.

Mrs. B. was the youngest of four, and her eldest sister Helen was 12 years older. She seems to have been a very determined, stubborn, fiercely independant woman, rather scornful and incisive, sometimes quite violent. She was extremely goodlooking and very stylish. Long ago she seems to have fought with their mother, and she split herself off most definitively from her brother and sisters about 30 years ago. The final breach occurred when her only daughter insisted on marrying a man right out of high school that Helen predicted, rightly as it turned out, would be a rotter. The Byrons were more loyal to the daughter, Joan, and have kept up with her throughout her somewhat checkered career as Joan lives through all the various Americanstatistics. When Fred's grandmother died in 1962 Mrs. B. called Helen on the phone (she continued to live in Boston all the time, where she worked for the State and became at her retirement the No. 2 person in charge of administering the state civil service). Mrs. B said, " Helen, I'm calling because our mother has just died. " and Helen answered," Thank you very much," and hung up.

Things remained at this roadblock until this summer, when Mrs. B's sense of decency and concern impelled her, after many false starts, for she was frightened of being rudely rejected yet again, to phone Helen once more. Nervously, they allowed one another to get in touch, they went in to see her, and as the fall went on, saw quite a bit of Helen and got increasingly worried as Helen, now 82, was clearly failing. But while failing, Helen steadfastly refused to get back into communication with her daughter Joan. Footnote: as Helen fails I am quite sure my father-in-law, who had to pay for his brother-in-law's treatment for mental illness, his sister-in-law Margaret's troubles with alcoholism, and his hated mother-in-law for years and years when she lived with them and was in a nursing home, was bemoaning to himself as he sat in his red chair, wondering why on earth his kind-hearted wife ever had to make that phone call to Helen, for I am sure he saw himself paying out yet again for Helen's nursing home. For Helen seemed to be living very poorly on her pension in a wretched bed-sitterof an apartment on Commonwealth Ave.

But events took a more dramatic turn. One evening about three weeks ago Mrs. B. phones Helen about 7, and becomes more concerned when there is no answer. Off they go to her apartment and have to ferret out the super to let them into the apartment, where sure enough, they find Helen lieing dying on the kitchen floor. They arrange that she be taken to the hospital, go home, and Helen dies during the night. This is Monday, and on the Wednesday Fred was due to go to Boston for UMass and to see them for dinner. They call beforehand and announce all these tumultuous events in their dry way and, wonder if Fred, since he will be there anyway, could go out to the airport and pick up his cousin Joan, arriving from her home in Florida.

Fred does all this and takes Joan to her mother's apartment where they are to meet his parents, and Joan is to start looking through her mother's papers. Whatever feelings Joan might be having during all this must be guessed, for Joan, while a fairly all right sort, is an incessant talker, and after waiting for her bags, driving to the apartment, etc. Fred already is numbed to all observation and feels as though he had been standing under a verbal waterfall for hours. The afternoon has just begun, however, and while everyone else is fatigued and shocked, Joan is bright, eager, and curious. The poor Byrons are tired, worried, concerned about the various appropriate emotions and gestures, and full of pathos at Helen's end. Mr. B is also tender-hearted and surprisingly squeamish, full of thoughts of memento mori, and Fred said he looked just awful, exhausted and highly irritated. He thinks his wife's family is full of bad and ill-fated blood anyway, judging from the fullsome events of the past, and I'm sure he was privately furious at his in-laws' seemingly undiminished capacity to make him suffer.

But Joan feels just fine and she rapidly turns out the sordid apartment with gusto, talking all the time. Helen has lived there for about 40 years and Fred gets more and more depressed as he contemplates where she ended up and all it implies about her life. The only bright note was supplied by the large number of Red Sox Yearbooks and scoring pads; Helen was clearly a fan up to the end.

Fortunately Helen left her affairs in good order, with a proper will, and some very surprising bankbooks. While living very meanly on her pension, Helen left cash and banknotes worth $107,000! Joan is jubilant.

Much as he would have liked to cut out at this point, Fred feels he must go on out to Dedham, and he finds himself driving Joan out there, for Joan is (rightfully) extremely wary of being driven by Mr. Byron. And indeed, after a few minutes of watching his father create havoc in the rush hour traffic on Commonwealth Ave., Fred cuts in front of him and races for Dedham. Mrs. B must have nerves of steel, but then we all know that she does, and Mr. B. must have not only one angel looking after him, but a whole company, commanded by an angel Sargeant.

As the evening goes on Fred can begin to feel his brain begin to seize up, and particularly as they come to the subject of what sort of service might be suitable. I do not think Helen was at all religious, but Mrs. B certainly is, and Joan is a born-again Christian with determined enthusiasm. She even sends Mrs. B cassettes of her choir's singing for Christmas. Mrs. B. had to borrow a tape recorder, did not enjoy the music when she had done so, and thought the whole thing in curious bad taste. By now everyone is getting tired, and they begin to wrangle. The Dedham minister is a nice man and has offered to do a little prayer service for free. Joan thinks a funeral proper will be wastefully expensive, but toys stubbornly with the idea of a memorial service (cheaper, because you do not have to have a body present in its casket). The discussion goes back and forth when suddenly Mr. B breaks in with one of his shouts, " What do you want to have a memorial service for?! Who on earth would want to come to a memorial service for Helen!!" This finally breaks Fred's trance of boredome and disgust, and he is able to get up abruptly and announce it is time for him to leave for home.

Helen and Joan's family history unfolds in sudden starts and enigmatic glimpses, rather in the style of Pinter, not their author, one would have thought. While they are all sitting gloomily in Helen's apartment a set of scrapbooks comes to light, with photos of Joan as a child and her father, a man called Don who seems to have lived with a continual atmosphere around him of slight ridicule. " Here is a picture of me and my father," says Joan. " Oh, but he wasn't your father!" says Mrs. Byron. Silence and Fred perks up, but this tidbit is not pursued.

After Fred escaped that night Joan and the Byrons had to manage for another week together, before everything was straightened out and Joan could return to Florida. I think they found this exhausting, for they are not used to so much company and they dislike driving about the city. We went in to see them last Friday with Ken, after one of his Joslin appointments, and although buffeted, they seemed pretty calm. But in their dry way, there were further revelations. In addition to talking to them, Joan talked on the phone a great deal, an instrument that the Byrons really consider a little excessive and to be used sparingly. Mrs. Byron complained that her husband called her every evening at 6, and when she answered the phone he would say gaily," Good Evening, Auntie Anne!" " And I've never even met him!" said Mrs. Byron. Oh, said I, but I thought you'd gone to see them in Florida! Pause. " Well, actually," says Mrs. Byron, " We've been keeping this from you: Joan has married a third time..." Fred and I got a great chuckle over this afterwards; from her tone of voice you would have thought she'd discovered that Joan was directing the trans-Caribbean heroin traffic. Joan and her second husband divorced when he started to commit adultery with the wife of some card-playing friends, and Joan has remarried. But, as Mr. and Mrs. Byron pointed out, he's seven years younger than she, has some trouble with a kidney, and he's Jewish. Poor man, he was doubtless only trying to be jolly and cosy in calling her Auntie Anne; I wonder if he could feel a crisp, Puritan breeze flowing down the telephone wires all the way to Gainesville? "But you don't know about the kidney disease," says Mr. B," Jewish people are always terrific complainers about their health. I know nurses in hospitals always hate to have them as patients". Cringe. And then he went on, "All the divorces are in your side of the family, dear", triumphantly accusing his wife, so content in his own "good blood". This is really Mr. B. at his worst, and I could see he hurt her, and I nearly up and said to him that the only reason his family didn't have some divorces too was that he himself is the only suriving member of it.

Of course with all this energy Joan is truly her mother's daughter, and clearly sexy, just as Helen was, and she seems unlikely to end up as lonely and bitter and sarcastic as her mother, so I say she has done pretty well. And that $107 thou will give her just the extra bit of income she needs to help all her 5 kids along and hopefully give herself and Mr. Greenberg a few treats.

There are two morals as I see it to be drawn from all this: 1) there is no such thing as a " mormal " family and 2) why bother to listen to General Hospital?

Although upsetting for them both, we could not but think that all this added a needed fillip to the Byrons' lives, for they seem to lead awfully boring ones. Just before it was time to leave she told us in detail how she washed Mrs. husband's woolen winter underwear by hand, wrung it out in the spin-dryer cycle of the washer, and then hung it up on a line in the cellar, and how recently she had dropped a piece onto the floor. Wickedly, she did not wash it again but let it dry, hoping the cellar's dirt would brush off when it was dry, which it did, and then the two of them fell to discussing whether or not you would be similarly lucky if a man's shirt fell onto the cellar, whether the dirt would sink into the weave of a shirt more than the weave of the L. L. Bean longjohns...

Ken is home on vacation, exhausted from his winter's struggle with algebra and chemistry. It is a mixture between Pilgrim's Progress and the myth of Sisyphus. So far he seems to be holding his nose just barely above water. He took the SATs again and did just fine on the verbals, but I should think one of those charming gorillas trained to talk in sign language could have had a better math score. There is not much time left to shape up in. At times he seems almost disabled by his teenage-ness, and I wish I could send him off to be a squire somewhere. His French is ok but not really good enough to get all that much lasting out of it, English and History are fine. He does have a nice treat coming up, in the form of a ten-day bike trip down in Virginia at the end of the month. This is one of the activities offered during the school's Intersession, a two-week period of mini-courses. He is mad for biking and this is just the sort of trip he has been longing to take, and they are going to Monticello, Charlottesville, Roanoake, etc., all the most interesting places, and it should be a great trip. I just had to lay out huge sums for equipment and bike overhauling, and feel just like Mr. Banks in Mary Poppins (" Do you think I'm made of money?").

Alex is just fine and seems to be doing very well. He is taking some exams now and I hope the results bear out his aplomb. I don't know what I am going to think of for him to do during his vacation.

We are all waiting most anxiously and peevishly for some tiny sign of spring, for the winter has seemed endless. I had one tough little snowdrop bloom under the kitchen window last week, which was a cheering sight, but it had more faith that I have. I privately think that in fact the sun is not getting higher in the sky this year. It has been nothing but cold and a succession of storms which lay down yet another layer of ice. When we went to Boston on Friday it did hit 50 degrees and the ground was bare there, and we felt practically as though we had been as far south as Savannah.

Now I am sure I have gone on long enough for your patience,